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ABSTRACT

Accountability has at times seemed more a harbinger of conflict than a vehicle for improved student learning. While some argue that federal accountability measures have been only superficially utilized in many instances, federal mandates have probably done more to sensitize educators to accountability than any other stimulus. Different states have approached accountability through state assessment programs, personnel evaluation programs, accreditation, or comprehensive systems involving all the accountability elements. Legislators have often seen accountability as a way to get feedback on the systems that consume much of the state budget. Administrators and teachers have often felt that another system, developed without their involvement, has been imposed on them by the state. Too often students have felt accountability's impact in an increasing number of tests and a subtle change in curriculum. Some say the accountability movement will be replaced by growing interest in alternative schools or another movement. But even in other movements, accountability questions must be addressed, for ultimately they have validity only as they deal with the purposes of education. (Author/JG)

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A MID-COURSE EVALUATION OF THE ACCOUNTABILITY MOVEMENT

Where did it all begin? One hundred fifty selected individuals have gathered here for two days in Denver, Colorado to participate in a dialogue on accountability. Five years ago, few would have predicted that this topic would occupy a central position on the educational stage in the mid-1970's. Some attribute all this furor, debate, and thousands of writings to Leon Lessinger, now Dean of the School of Education and the other USC--the University of South Carolina. You'll hear Dr. Lessinger later and someone will probably refer to him as the Father of Accountability--because he was perhaps the first to articulate this concept a few years ago while he served in the U. S. Office of Education. But many educators have been quick to point out that while the term may be a recent one to the educational jargon--accountability has been with us for some time. No question that this is right.

In early days it was not uncommon for a teacher to receive his/her room and board from parents in exchange for teaching their children. The teacher shifted his residency periodically from family to family and was always under scrutiny. It was a simple accountability cycle. A single family or several families acting collectively would retain a teacher to give instruction to the offsrping. The determination of the program, the presentation of the curriculum, and the evaluation of the learning took place in a simple and direct manner.

But the circle grew - and became more complex. The number of participants increased. A teacher joined with other teachers. A head teacher emerged and finally we had a leader called a "principal." As the student numbers grew, a

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superintendent was hired - and local school board members began to serve as representatives of all the parents of the community. Eventually, states formed state boards of education and state departments, while a number of federal agencies, HEW and USOE also came into the picture. It has become a gigantic system and one that has come to be entwined with employee organizations such as the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and the American Association of School Administrators, as well as the PTA, National School Boards Association, and special interest groups such as American Education Research Association, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and the listing could go on and on. Management scientists might call it a sophisticated delievery system. Some are less kind. A self-perpetuating system, some would say. A complex that feeds on itself and has forgotten its purpose - a monstrosity - a dollar-eating bureaucracy, say some legislators. An alien, unfriendly environment, say some of the clients.

So from the early days of a rather tight-knit parent/teacher/student cycle operating close to the family unit, education is now a major societal effort involving approximately 18,000 school districts, 2 million teachers, and 45 million public school students. The direct simple accountability process of the early years perhapshas not been lost, but it's safe to say that the process has been buried in an organizational maze until Lessinger and others recently began suggesting this as a concept or idea that educators must address or face a further loss of credibility with the public.

Thus began our "era of accountability" - a period of time when the basic purposes of education are being examined, assumptions previously accepted are being tested, and the education community and the public at large appear to have come to at least a mild confrontation in most parts of the country. Accountability

has at times seemed almost more like the harbinger of conflict and disruption than a vehicle for unit and improved student learning - as many of us had hoped. To some of us, accountability was a loaded - but rather simple sequence involving answers to at least four basic questions regarding our educational programs:

Where are we going?

How do we get there?

How do we judge our progress?

How do we report our progress?

As a college professor I began looking at our administrative preparation programs in this light. Later, as a deputy superintendent, I sought to apply these questions to the day-to-day operation of a school district of 35,000 students, and for the last two years have found this sequence to have meaning in approaching the planning responsibilities of a Chief State School Officer in a state having over half a million students and expenditures of 300 - 400 million dollars annually. I say these things to let you know where I'm coming from in viewing the events of the last few years.

All of you are interested in the educational endeavors of our country and sensitive to the developments in this arena. Many of you have been personally involved in some phase of an accountability thrust. To give a common base for many of our discussions of the next 30 hours, I would like to quickly review some of the developments in accountability over the last five years - for it is out of this background that the National Forum on Accountability takes on real significance as a mid-decade evaluation of this particular educational concept.

Let's begin at the federal level for it was in this sphere that Dr. Lessinger approached the need for an accountability process - and the influence here would appear to be substantial. Most federal programs require specification of objectives, activities designed to achieve these ends, an evaluation plan, and a reporting procedure. Certain programs also call for heavy parental involvement. In addition, on-site performance type audits are employed in some of the titles of ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act). I feel that the federal commitment to accountability is a deep one - and one that is due to increase and become even more refined. There has been criticism voiced by some that the process - because of the magnitude of the effort and the demanding timelines provided for in the legislation and the regulations - has been only superficially utilized to date in many instances. While this is probably accurate, the federal mandates as they relate to elements of accountability have probably done more to sensitize educators to a systematic way of looking at a project than any other single stimulus in the country.

Commissioner Bell has indicated great support for the accountability process and advocated use of MBO - Management by Objectives - as a management system that provides a road map for a local district and one that can be a source of momentum to local school improvement. With this kind of suppprt in the U. S. Office of Education - coupled with the obvious Congressional interest - it is difficult to see any reduction in the accountability emphasis from Washington. In fact, at this level we may see a heightened stress on accountability components.

At the state level, a great variation in approach can be seen. Through 1974 approximately 30 states had enacted some type of legislation - others had done something through rules/regulations adopted by state boards of education.

In some instances states have approached accountability through state assessment programs - or personnel evaluation programs - or accreditation - or a comprehensive system involving all of the accountability elements - or an approach such as PPBS which ties the planning and programming to the budget system. What are some of the impressions one gets from these programs? For example:

Pennsylvania has taken an interesting approach involving the identification of 10 Goals of Quality Education and instrumentation to judge a district's standing in regard to these goals - and some relative understanding of how a district stands in regard to districts having similar resources. This probably is a unique undertaking because of Pennsylvania's effort to utilize goals outside of the basic skill areas and make some judgment as to student progress in achieving these goals. The concern might rest in the degree to which districts follow through and utilize such information.

Florida state that has placed considerable importance on a State-wide Assessment Program. An impressive program in terms of its emphasis on the individual school results and the identifcation of specific objectives for certain skill areas at selected grade levels. While there seems to be appreciation for the testing and measurement expertise back of the plan, some concerns surfacing regarding the emphasis on test results in certain disciplinary areas only, and the mechanics of the process.

In Colorado we h a v e tried the comprehensive approach. That is, each district has been charged with establishing a local accountability committee and building a system with all of the key accountability

concepts. Much local latitude is allowed with no state assessment program involved. After four years certain problems seem to re-occur; namely, the difficulty of the large district to incorporate the approach into its routine operation, and a statewide problem of relating a district's identified goals and objectives to an implementation and evaluation plan.

Michigan has been a key state in terms of the breadth of the accountability effort and the apparent strong reaction by the Michigan Education Association membership. The Michigan plan is a well-conceived six-step plan to achieve improvement recommendations for local and state board of education consideration. Substantial time and resources went into the refinement of the testing program, needs analysis, and statement of objectives. But despite this investment, the state became one of the major centers of controversy when the Michigan Education Association, with the support of the NEA, issued an assessment of the Michigan accountability plan after examination by Professors Rivers, House, and Stufflebeam. The able State Superintendent, John Porter, a strong advocate of the system developed, suddenly found he was the focus for accountability critics throughout the country and what started with great promise has apparently become handicapped by political challenges and an ongoing expression of concern by Michigan teachers.

One final example should be noted. The New York City Board of Education and the United Federation of Teachers negotiated a commitment to develop a professional accountability effort in cooperation with institutions of higher education, community school boards, and the parent organizations. An entire accountability plan focusing at least initially on reading, mathematics, oral and written expression, and attendance was one plan growing out of this agreement.

The plan is interesting because of the detailed procedures for organizing the effort, selecting various school characteristics to be considered in evaluating the test data, phasing-in procedures, and the operational definition - namely, that accountability is the acceptance of responsibility for consequences.

Through Colorado's involvement in the Cooperative Accountability Project and the state's own legislated mandated accountability program, I have had relatively frequent opportunity to observe the reactions associated with implementation of this process across the country. The reactions have been quite diverse. Let me dwell on some of the negatives only at this point to emphasize the challenge we face in getting the accountability process understood and internalized.

Legislators have often seen this as a handle to getting some feedback on the system that consumes a major part of a state's budget. But this optimism has dwindled - and turned to frustration as they have watched a slower implementation than expected and the development of obstacles unforeseen in the early stages. What might have been a means of improving the relationship between legislators and educators appears now to have become one more indication to some of the legislative skeptics - that educators are foot-draggers and not to be fully trusted.

Administrators have often felt that something has been imposed on them by the state. Another encroachment on local autonomy - another task. A task not fully understood - and rather than being seen as something to help them with their decision-making as proponents claim - administrators have often felt threatened by the process and unsure of the mechanics. This situation is

complicated by a tendency on the part of many school board members to feel that accountability offers a ray of hope in getting hold of their particular job and have come to feel concern for a superintendent and central staff or principals who "can't make the darn system work" as one board member stated recently.

Teachers have had their frustrations too. In some cases, accountability legislation was almost specifically aimed at teachers - a reaction in part to tenure law frustrations and the rise in collective bargaining agreements. Teachers found in too many instances that they were the chief implementors of a system developed without their involvement - a little like sitting in the eye of the hurricane knowing that you are soon to be pounded by the winds. Teachers were launched into writing behavioral objectives, and more objectives, and more objectives - or the objectives were developed apart from their classroom or school and became their responsibility as some phase of a state assessment pattern. The reaction has been predictable. Many teachers have been seen as unwilling to accept responsibility - and be accountable - when their voices have been raised to protest the mechanics of a plan.

A further problem has developed in building and district staffs when the accountability plan has zeroed in on a few of the more measurable disciplines - such as reading and mathematics.

Teachers in other areas such as home economics, art, or physical education have not been involved. Staffs became split as some teachers spent full time on accountability implementation while others were left to carry on building-wide effort studies regarding such issues as discipline, attendance, and schedule changes.

Even students have become involved and I say that with tongue-in-cheek. Some have been involved in the movement and have been brought into the process. Colorado has made such an effort. But too often students have felt the impact by an increasing number of tests and in a subtle manner have experienced a change in curriculum to reflect more measurable objectives. As a result some have seen the threat of a de-humanizing school experience that is accepted because it is more amenable to the quantification rather than individual growth. I personally don't think this has to be the case but it has to be listed as one of the generalized concerns raised in the last few years.

Other general alarms have been sounded. Long smoldering concerns about the actual sophistication of our testing programs have surfaced in recent years because of the key role of evaluation in the accountability process. How valid and reliable are these instruments used to verify growth in academic skills? A common question now in the profession.

If we can feel confidence in our measurement of progress, how far can we go in accountability? And if this is a weakness, what justification do proponents have for even suggesting that staff members can be evaluated on the basis of student growth? A question that is not being raised in many States - but one that rests naggingly in the minds of many educators.

I've tried to highlight some of the major issues and questions in regard to the accountability movement as it stands in 1975. Some have said this movement will be replaced by a growing interest now in alternative schools - or options in

education as I prefer. Some have seen career education or dropout and retention efforts as displacing accountability.

Maybe. But even in these movements accountability questions must be addressed because they ultimately come to have validity only as they deal with the purposes of education and if we cannot answer such basic questions in accountability, there is little hope for the questions being resolved through another movement.

Which brings me to the final segment - a comment on the conference we begin here this morning.

The conference is designed to bring together a cross-section of professionals and lay leadership to look at some of these issues. Heavy priority has been given to the involvement of teacher representatives since it was felt that this voice was somewhat neglected in the past. Some anger and frustration will surface - and this is good - if it can be a transition to the resolution of some basic problems.

You might ask - why the emphasis on the 4 topics? These were arrived at after much debate. The topics

- Goals - Objectives
- Achieving Objectives
- Assessment - evaluation, and
- Who should be accountable - and for what?

should surface the problems and the hopes inherent in the accountability process.

The concept of accountability is too powerful to set aside. As monstrous as some of the problems seem, a way must be found to give direction - purpose - and meaning to education. Hence the key topic - goals and objectives. School staffs have too often, consciously or unintended, avoided facing dialogue over the reasons for their existence. Let's assume schools have a responsible role in society. Who and how should the goals and objectives be established to reflect individual

and societal needs?

Once goals are identified, how are these ends to be achieved? One of the most challenging and creative accountability tasks is to relate the goals and objectives to a program. So who - when - and how does the machinery respond to these objectives - becomes a critical decision.

The judgment as to the progress made is perhaps the most difficult component. How do we evaluate the total impact of a system change without being a single reactor as one blind man touching one part of a camel? This is a complex phase, but for a country that reached to the moon, surely we can judge the development and growth of an elementary student, although the effort may be no less difficult than moon exploration.

And finally, who should be accountable to whom and for what? The educational system is complex - as indicated at the offset of this presentation. There are many actors - many parts to play. Not just in the actual delivery of instruction - but in the provisions of facilities, resources and budget support - as well as a sensitive and responsive organization

This conference may have been spawned in frustration but those of us in the system and those of you concerned about a quality product but coming here as lay representatives are looking at one of the most critical challenges to education thus far. Can we provide answers to these questions - can we come to feel that society's educational effort is subject to a rational determination of purpose planning and evaluation? It will be a terrible condemnation of our society if we should determine that we have given birth to a system that defies analysis and

direction. I see this issue in its broadest sense as a challenge to our rational powers and our ability to control our own destiny in part. For if we conclude the system is begyond our intellectual insight and beyond rational direction, we must be willing to scrap the system. I don't think we're at this point, but it's a major challenge of our time.